

RELIGIOUS CHARACTER

OF ANCIENT COINS

BY

JEREMIAH ZIMMERMAN, D.D., LL.D.,

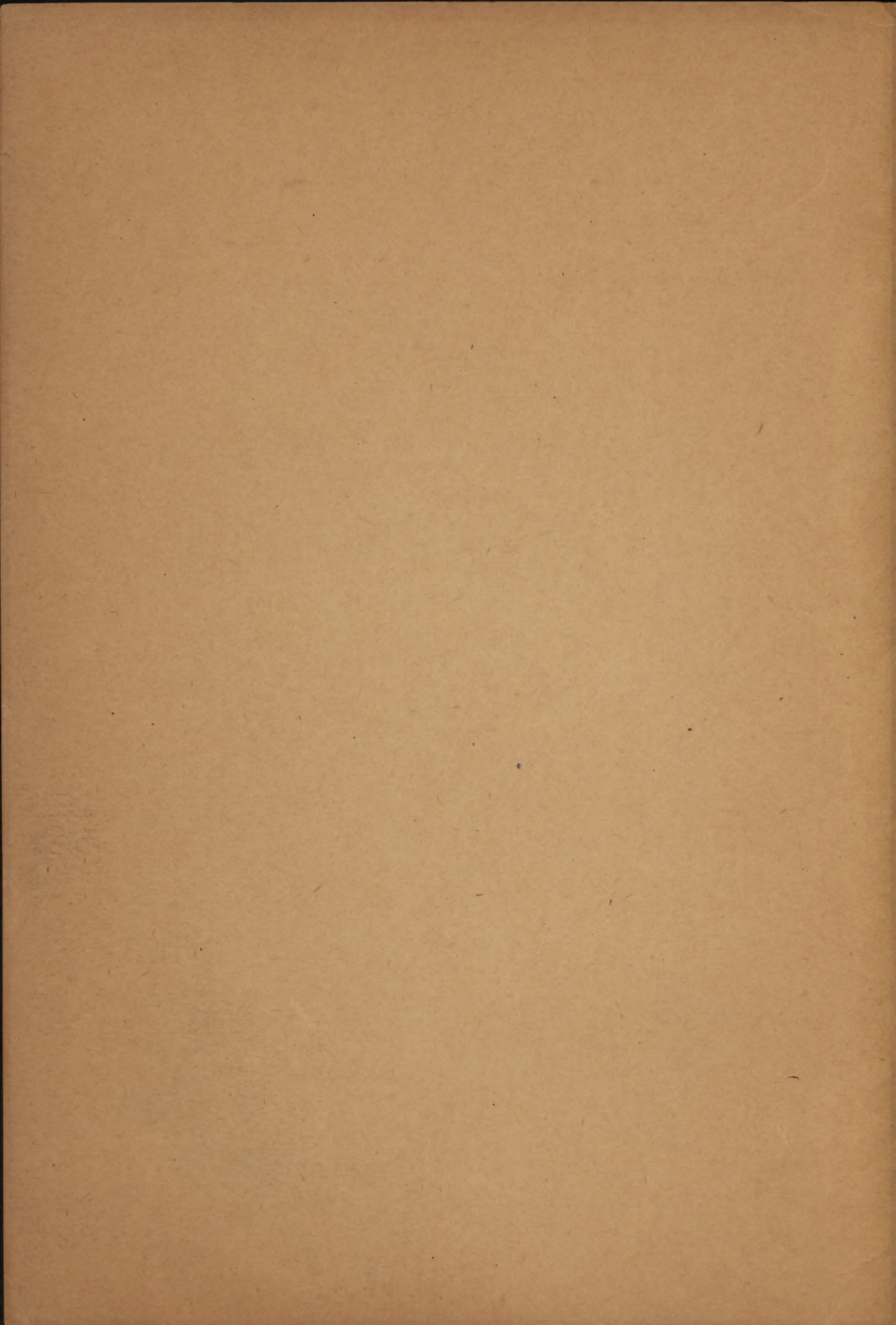
SYRACUSE, N. Y.,

Contributor to the Standard Dictionary, on Ancient Coins

Reprinted from the *Numismatic Circular*, 1908.

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RELIGIOUS CHARACTER OF ANCIENT COINS

The order of President Roosevelt to omit the familiar inscription, "In God we trust," from the new \$ 10 gold pieces, has awakened all manner of criticism, and the tremendous outcry of individuals and the condemnatory resolutions of churches and conferences recall a similar hostile attitude that developed in England some years ago. Many Christian and religious types had been introduced on the coins of Europe since the days of Constantine the Great,



Coin with Mars Victor.

and Richard II placed the inscription : "Dei Gratia" on the English coinage, but when it was omitted from the silver florin of 1848-9, and a new type substituted, there was a storm of opposition that resounded throughout all England—and doubtless the transgressor often regretted his act of indiscretion, for the godless florin was of short duration. President Roosevelt has never been charged with irreligious motives in ordering the religious inscription to be omitted from the new coin, and yet many of his greatest admirers have regretted what they regard as a hasty and ill-advised action, and feel that for the sake of the universal religious sentiment of the people, it would have been policy, at least, not to have removed the ancient landmark. Whilst the "Dei Gratia" was restored, it is not unlikely that "In God we trust" will find a place again on the

\$ 10 gold piece long before the die is worn out. As far as I am personally concerned my faith is not disturbed, for the truth expressed in that inscription is just as real to me, whether stamped upon our coins or not, but so far as the people are concerned, I hope that they will not be denied any of the blessings that such a national religious faith expressed on our coins may bring to them and to their children, and I am sure that our foremost American, and most conscientious President, would deprive no one of such a heritage.

In view of the wide discussion and the general interest shown, it may be profitable and interesting to the readers of the NUMISMATIC CIRCULAR to give a brief survey of certain features of the religious character of the coins of the ancient Greeks and Romans, from the early history of coinage in the VIIth century B. C., through a period of one thousand years.

The science of numismatics abundantly shows that man is a religious being, for the coins of Greece and Rome prove that their religion was as inseparable from their money as from their daily life, for all their best works in art and literature were consecrated to the gods whom they revered.



Head of Arethusa, goddess of ancient Syracuse.

The presence of the images of the divinities of Greece on their national coinage is an important contemporary witness to the universal and deeply religious character of the ancient Greeks. They were intensely religious as they were intellectual, and their belief in the gods as the source of all blessings was so profound and practical that their gratitude was expressed in their frequent offerings and prayers.

Hence the presence of a religious inscription on a coin is no modern innovation, and without historical precedents, but from an early date, through centuries, the Greeks stamped the familiar representations of their deities upon their coinage. Nor was it strange that a religious people should have associated their religion with their money, for their purpose was to keep before the people the

actual gods whom they held to be the founders, saviours, preservers, and patrons of their cities and the inspirers of their best works, as shown by the coins of Thasos.

It is generally believed that the earliest coins were struck within the sacred precincts of the temple, and this view is in harmony with



Tetradrachm of Thasos,
with the inscription : **ΗΡΑΚΛΕΟΥΣ ΣΩΤΗΡΟΣ ΘΑΣΙΩΝ**
(Herakles Saviour or Preserver of the Thasians).

the early representative character of money, and also the fact that in early and insecure times the temples were the safe and inviolate places for the rich treasures stored therein. When the transition came



Tetradrachm of Lysimachus, king of Thrace.
(Coin with portrait of Alexander the Great.)

to convert the bars and wedges of electrum, gold and silver into coins it was natural that the mint should have been established in the same place, under the direction of the priests and representatives of the state and the supervision of the gods, whose images the coins bore, as a guarantee for their genuine character. In fact, the very word money is derived from the temple of Juno Moneta, in Rome, for within its precincts the public mint was established, and it is but natural to suppose that the Romans adopted this idea also from the Greeks.

Just as the history of the Greeks and Romans is inseparably connected with their religion, in like manner was their money identified with their religion, bearing the images and superscriptions of their gods and goddesses. The effigies or symbols of these were stamped upon the gold, silver, and bronze coins, so that their vast pantheon is represented in a variety of religious types on the money that circulated for domestic and national use, containing the familiar images of Zeus, Saturn, Neptune, Mars, Mercury, Apollo, Hercules, Vulcan, Juno, Venus, Diana, Cybele, Athene, Arethusa, Astarte, Persephone, Apis, Anubis, &c.

These images of their deities served as guardians of the genuine character of this all-important medium of exchange, and appeared as a guarantee that the money was of the required weight and purity, for Bryan's monetary heresy of recent times had not led their people to believe, even during a political campaign, that 50 cents worth of silver was equal to 100 of gold.



Tetradrachm of Athens.

The coins were generally stamped with the image of the local guardian deity, or else with the recognized symbol of that deity, just as the coins of Athens bore the effigy of Pallas and the owl, the symbol of that goddess. Thus, on a coin of Claudius and Agrippina, we have preserved one of the very best extant copies of the famous and much venerated image of "Diana of the Ephesians," whose zealous followers opposed the work of the Apostle Paul in their city. As that same image appears on a coin of Philip, the Arab, we may conclude that the worship of the many-breasted Asiatic nature goddess prevailed in Ephesus at least two centuries later.

So scrupulously guarded was the religious character of the coinage of the Greeks in placing the images of their deities upon their money that it was not until after the death of Alexander the Great that the effigy of a human being received this distinction. Nor did Alexander himself, with all his overreaching worldwide ambition, presume to usurp the place reserved for the gods by placing his own image there, for though he was a supplanter of kings and the rulers

of earth, he did not attempt to supplant deities. He did dare to discard from the face of his coins the well-known effigies of the hereditary gods Ares and Apollo, and substituted those of Pallas, Herakles, and the Zeus of Olympia, but he refrained from introducing his own. It was not until after he had completed his brilliant earthly career and passed from the eyes of men that his apotheosis



Diana of the Ephesians.

took place, and when dazzled by his seeming superhuman achievements the people assigned him a place among the gods, it was only a logical sequence that Lysimachus and Ptolemy gave him the supreme and divine distinction by placing his somewhat idealized



Queen Philistis, wife of Hiero II., of ancient Syracuse.
First Portrait of a Woman to appear on a coin, *circ.* 250 B.C.

portrait upon their coins, although Pallas was retained on the reverse of the former and Zeus was enthroned on the reverse of the latter, so that the gods still retained their ancient seats upon the money.

Whilst the apotheosis, or elevation of Alexander the Great to a place, hitherto reserved for deities, was an innovation in history, yet the process was a gradual one achieved through years of brilliant conquests that seemed to justify his bold claim to be the son of Zeus Ammon, and this made his ascendancy to a place among the gods

quite natural ; hence the people found no fault when they saw his portrait on the tetradrachm substituted for the long familiar Libyan god.

From this period begins a long and interesting portrait gallery of many of the rulers of the Greek world, whose images occupy the obverse of the coins, whilst the reverse is generally reserved for the effigies or symbols of the deities.

The same custom was followed by the Romans, who stamped their coins with the portraits of rulers and distinguished women of the court, but on the reverse they often gave place to the effigies and names of their gods and goddesses. So general was this custom of



Tribute Money.
(Denarius of Emperor Tiberius).

stamping the Greek and Roman money with religious types that the half-shekel became a necessity for the maintenance of the temple at Jerusalem, and no wonder that the priests refused the current money for the sacred tribute of the sanctuary, and obliged the people to have it exchanged for the half-shekel, which was free from all pagan devices. In commercial value it was identical with the two drachma, or the two denarii that were current in Palestine, but to have put money containing the images and symbols of pagan gods into the treasury of their holy temple, erected to the worship of one God, would have been sacrilege to the faithful Jews.

It was a grievous calamity that befell the Jews when their city and temple were destroyed in the year 70, but a gross insult was added to that injury when the Emperor Vespasian and his successors for many years imposed upon them a special tribute for rebuilding and maintaining the temple of Jupiter Capitolinus in Rome. The Emperor ordered the Jews, in whatever country they might be, to pay for this purpose the sum of two drachma, or two denarii, the equivalent of the half-shekel that they had hitherto paid to the support of their holy temple in Jerusalem. To the pious Jew this was enforced idolatry, and many were the efforts at times to escape it.

We can easily understand what a shocking outrage this must have been to the religious sensibilities of the grievously oppressed Jews, who, suffering from the loss of their temple and worship, were now forced to do what seemed like the very climax of sacrilege, to contribute to the support of a temple and its worship, the very name of which was an abhorrence to the Hebrews. That temple of Jupiter, on the Capitoline Hill, seems to rise again from the wrecks of the distant centuries, and gives us vivid and realistic impressions of the political and religious state of the Jew in his relation to the Gentile world, as we study one of the coins of Vespasian, Titus, or Domitian, that bears an excellent representation of this most venerated building in Rome for the Romans, but the most profane to the faithful Hebrew. But how different this coin appeared to the religious consciousness of the oppressed Jew as he looked upon it; for it was inseparable from the saddest associations and many suffered shameful humiliations from the severe and revolting measures enforced by Domitian. On the accession of the humane Nerva, however, the most disgraceful usages and malicious perversions of justice in gaining the necessary information for imposing the tax were abolished. The Roman Senate struck a special coin on which they commemorated this noble act, thus making it a most interesting historical monument. Nothing makes those distant times so real and brings them so near as when I study attentively these contemporaneous coins, for they are also contemporaneous and unrevised monuments.

I have another most interesting coin that shows the humiliating and oppressed condition of the Jews after their disastrous efforts to throw off the Roman yoke under the leadership of Bar Cochab. That unsuccessful endeavour, from 132-135 A.D., involved his own race in the greatest misfortunes. The Jewish power was crushed. They were forbidden to enter the city of Jerusalem on pain of death, and in shameful contempt for them a figure of a swine was placed over the Bethlehem gate. We can easily realize this fact when we examine a coin struck by the Tenth Legion *Fratensis* at Jerusalem, where Titus originally stationed them to guard the place after the destruction of the city, for on that coin we have a confirmation, in the figure of the swine and the letters, "L. X. F." stamped upon it. Imagine the feelings of a Jew paid in such money! even if it were the legionary symbol. There were other types no less offensive to him, but often there was no alternative, for money was a necessity.

The early Christians were embarrassed with the same religious character of the money, for they were obliged to use for the most sacred purposes of their holy religion the gold, silver, and bronze coins of imperial Rome and Greece that bore the images and types of a pagan mythology which they repudiated. They cherished a differ-

ent faith, as the Apostle Paul wrote to the Christians in the Church at Corinth: "There is no God but one. For though there be that are called gods, whether in heaven or on earth; as there are gods many, and lords many, yet to us there is one God, the Father, of whom are all things, and one unto Him, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things, one through Him." It must have been a great joy to the Christian Church, when, after the accession of Constantine the Great, they saw the labarum and symbols of Christ appear on the imperial coinage, but their hearts must have sunk again, when later, his nephew, Julian the Philosopher, in his zeal to restore paganism, supplanted the Christian symbols with pagan devices, and placed on the money the figure of Apis, banishing every suggestion of the cross and of that religion so dear to the struggling church. And how suddenly that sorrow was turned into joy, for with the death of Julian, Jovianus ascended the throne and the image of Apis disappeared, and the symbols of Christ appeared again on the coinage of Rome. I do not mean to convey the impression that in the instances named the cross appeared on all, but rather on a few, types, and yet that was an acknowledgment of Christ on the coins of the empire, and the change was natural, for among the ancient Romans the universal religious sentiment found expression in their national life, as well as entered into the daily affairs of their domestic and social relations, for no household was without its tutelary divinities, but it worshipped as its guardian spirits the Lares and the Penates. The state observed the forms of religion most scrupulously, and under the empire the Emperor became the Pontifex Maximus or head of the pontificate, and the insignia of four priestly colleges appear on certain coins of Antoninus Pius.

In referring to the *cross* on these coins as a symbol of Christianity, I am reminded that some have thought to discredit this religious character by informing us that the symbol of the cross had been borrowed from paganism, and "had been used long before Jesus was born", and that the Christian traditions associated with it in the modern mind are pagan in origin. But there is nothing in such reasoning to detract from the Christian significance of the cross even though some ancient coins may have borne a geometrical form of it, or that thousands of human beings had been crucified long before the advent of Christianity, or that there is nothing new in its form — all true enough, for the Southern Cross is as old as Creation. And when I looked upon that studded starlit cross in the celestial dome, our own cross did not lose its special significance. As well say that the Christian cross is only the modern development of the earlier conception of the multitudinous forms of the cross seen in the masts and rigging of the ship; in the stem and

branches of trees and plants; and in man himself as he stands with outstretched arms in adoration of Deity. Christ invested the cross with a new meaning, and such as the ancients never conceived of, and to the World to-day it is the symbol of God's matchless love and man's redemption.

To deny the original Christian conception of this meaning and use of the cross as a symbol of Christianity, merely because the form antedates the advent of Christ, is as unreasonable as it would be for an Oriental to declare that the presence of the eagle on our American coinage is unmistakable proof of the Greek origin of our Country and the pagan character of our national religion, inasmuch as that bird was the symbol of Zeus.

Suppose an Oriental coming to my city of Syracuse should display a didrachm of Acragas, issued in the 1st quarter of the 5th Century, B. C. stamped with this same familiar eagle, and still another coin of a somewhat later date, that issued from the Mint of our own name-sake city of ancient Syracuse, bearing the same bird, and similar to the well-known eagle that adorns our coinage, would he be justified in pointing to that ancient symbol of Zeus, and then declare that it was a monumental proof that our religion was the same as that old cult for the same symbol was used that appeared on the ancient Greek coins? We would reply that it was a very different eagle, for we see in the eagle that loves freedom the symbol of our American Independence. In other words, we have invested it with an entirely new and different meaning, and the same is true of the cross, when appropriated by Christianity. It is an altogether different cross, and so the Christians understood it as they saw it with joy upon their national coinage, hence it is the richest and most precious of all symbols, because it is the symbol of God's love, and man's hope.

The most ambitious rulers did not contest the undisputed sway of the gods in maintaining their symbols and effigies upon the coinage of Ancient Greece. Even Agathocles, the famous tyrant of Syracuse, and contemporary of Alexander the Great, who dared to do many extravagant things, did not have the temerity to place his image upon the coins he issued, and for a time he even refrained from putting his own name, but stamped them with the name of the great City, and it was not until after his signal victory over the Carthaginians, in Africa, in 310 B. C. that he substituted his own name for that of Syracuse.

There is an exceedingly interesting coin, especially to the student of the New Testament. It is the coin of the proconsul Proclus, struck on the island of Cyprus, during the reign of Claudius. On this coin we have a remarkable and important confirmation of the accuracy of the writer of the Acts of the Apostles. For more than a century

many of the leading critics of France and Germany denied the historical character of St. Luke's statement in Acts xiii : 12, wherein he calls Sergius Paulus, the ruler at Paphos, a deputy or proconsul. The ground of the objection was that a proconsul was appointed by the Senate, and only to provinces where no military force was required, and as they contended that a military camp existed on the island at that time, the ruler could not have been proconsul, but a proprætor, or procurator appointed by the Emperor. The long and bitter controversy that impeached the accuracy of the sacred narrative was suddenly brought to a close by the discovery of 3 coins struck in the island, during the reign of Claudius, bearing his portrait on the obverse, and on the reverse the name of the local deputy, Cominus Proclus, with the title of proconsul ἀνθυπατος, — the identical Greek word employed by St. Luke, and as St. Paul visited Cyprus during the reign of Claudius, it was settled by the coin that Sergius Paulus was a proconsul, and Cyprus was at that time a senatorial and not an imperial province.

The coinage of the subsequent Christian centuries bears many examples of sacred symbols and effigies, and the history of early Christian numismatics shows considerable variation of religious sentiment as expressed on the current coins. At times there is merely a symbolic representation of the cross, or initial letters, and then again an image of the Saviour. Justinian II, who was guilty of many crimes, has, perhaps, his strongest, but not enviable claim of being a Christian, in a contemporary numismatic monument, for on a gold solidus he put the bust of the Saviour, and on the reverse, a full-length portrait of himself, grasping the cross as the symbol of his faith.

Then succeeded the iconoclastic dynasty, when the effigies of Christ were excluded from the coins. In time the sacred effigies appeared again, and Leo the Philosopher and son of Basil the Macedonian was the author of a marked innovation, for he placed the bust of the Virgin Mary with the legend, Mary — ΜΡΘΥ = Mary, Mother of God, showing a new movement in theological thought, which reached its climax in this legend placed upon the coins of Romanus Diogenes, 1065 : " O, glorious Virgin, he that trusteth in thee prospers in all things ". This petition appears on the besants of Alexius : " Help us, O Lord! "

To trace this subject further would be to exceed the limits fixed for this paper, and I shall close as I began. Whether the inscription : " In God we trust " be retained is immaterial, for I am confident that the religious faith and character of the people will be in no wise affected, for the belief expressed in that legend was ineffaceably inscribed upon the human heart long before the Asiatic invention of coins by the Libyans. Though all religious inscriptions should be

omitted from the coinage of the world, the people would still continue religious, for man is essentially a religious being, and the science of religions shows that no race of men has ever been discovered without religion.

I recall an interview with the great French archæologist, Maspero, and a statement that he made to the writer in the Cairo Museum, when he spoke of the almost universal religious character of the monuments and inscriptions discovered in the valley and boundaries of the Nile, for he declared that the number and proportion were so great that one might almost conclude that ancient Egypt had been mainly peopled by the gods, and had only animals and men enough for sacrifices, and to attend to worship.

To ask, why is man a religious being, we might as well ask why does man think, why does he love? Man is a thinker and there is something for him to think about. Man loves for there is much to love, and the God who made him is love. In like manner the universal nature of mankind responds to the Infinite Spirit and Absolute Being, the Creator of man, and in whom we live and move and have our being, and man cannot help but to be religious.

The importance of retaining the inscription "In God we trust" on the \$ 10 gold piece, or not, will depend largely upon the point of view of the individual, although in accord with the almost universal feeling of the people, I am persuaded that it was a mistake to remove it. Had our great and noble President been conversant with the history of the religious character of coinage through the many centuries, he would have been more conservative in his action respecting the removal of this cherished public declaration of our national and abiding faith in Almighty God.

It seems that the designer for artistic reasons favoured its removal, as its presence would crowd the figures, but instead of sacrificing this inspiring motto, it would have been far better to have made space by limiting the *feathers* of the too-much-feathered Indian, or by clipping the feathers of the *bantam* legs of the eagle, for it is rather a caricature, as no such eagle is grown in North America.

It is to be hoped that the next design will be not only artistic but true to nature as well — by giving us a typical and nobler head of the Indian and also of our bird of liberty, — in other words — more head and less feathers, for with the sublime inscription restored and such caricatures remaining, the sublime and ridiculous would be brought too near together to inspire a feeling of reverence.

The eminent artist might have succeeded far better in this venture in the medalllic art, had he selected for his model, a strong, typical American Indian, and from this genuine native example, portrayed the marked distinctive racial features of the historic Red man, instead of presenting a fictitious type, modelled after the weak face of

an imported Irish girl, for we wanted the real aboriginal and not a foreign character upon that gold piece. It is merely a coined Indian.

The President acted from conscientious motives, and though he may have erred in judgment, no one need imagine a national calamity so long as we have men like himself at the head of the



Coin with head of Zeus.

nation, who love righteousness, hate iniquity and fear God. It is all important that the faith expressed in that inscription should ever be retained in the hearts of the people, for "blessed is the nation whose God is Jehovah".

P. S. The bill of the restoration of the motto "In God we trust" passed the Senate unanimously on May 13th and was approved by the President soon afterward, and henceforth the restored inscription will appear on both the \$ 10. and \$ 20.00 gold pieces, — never again to disappear from the American Coinage.

PROTAT BROTHERS, PRINTERS, MACON (FRANCE)
